"We've Got to Kill Them": Responses to Bucha on Russian Social Media Groups

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On the weekend of 1–3 April 2022, Western media sources broke news of a number of civilian corpses uncovered in Bucha, a satellite town to the northwest of Kyiv from which invading Russian forces had recently retreated. Images of bodies lying in the streets of the town, in cellars and buildings, and with hands tied and marks of rape and other torture rapidly went viral on Twitter and other social media networks. Social media users and politicians began to label what had occurred in Bucha an act of genocide. On Monday 4 April, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky visited the town and accused Russian forces of "genocide" and "war crimes."[1] Western governments have largely concurred; Canada's Parliament, for instance, voted unanimously to label Russian behaviour in Ukraine a "genocide."[2] Scholars have long debated Russia's history of genocide – or genocidal behaviour – in its war in Chechnya. More recently, they have explored the country's role in aiding the Syrian regime in committing its own genocide.[3] However, potentially genocidal behaviour under the Putin regime has never been so widely discussed by the western public as in the case of Bucha.

The Bucha incident and subsequent discoveries of more killings and the wide perpetration of acts of torture and rape seem to have been endlessly dissected on English-language mainstream and social media. However, little coverage has been given to how Russian audiences have reacted to

accusations of genocide committed by their country's troops. Although videos and photos began to circulate in the Russian social media space in parallel with those on English channels, Russian mainstream media and media figures did not address Bucha until the morning of 2 April (Moscow time). A series of contradictory stories were unleashed over a period of several hours. Russians were told that returning Ukrainian forces had killed Russian collaborators, that Ukraine had shelled the city indiscriminately, that the images and videos were faked, that bodies were moving in the videos spreading online, that no violence had taken place in Bucha at all, that Ukrainian neo-Nazis had deliberately targeted Russian-speaking Ukrainians in special torture chambers, and that the whole affair was an anti-Russian US conspiracy.[4]

In this forum contribution, I use content and discourse analysis to provide a sample of Russian users' reactions to events in Bucha on nationalist Telegram channels, to explore the anti- or pro-genocidal nature of those reactions, and to begin to offer a typology of such reactions. This material serves as a repository of translated materials in a quickly evolving social media war and provides information for scholars of genocide seeking to understand what is driving public opinion in Russia. However, my findings also suggest that the closed spaces of Russia's social media groups are encouraging extremist, pro-genocidal comments to be widely and rapidly shared: the reality of Bucha as a Russian atrocity has been absorbed into tropes of subhuman Ukrainians and Russian "self-defence" that require more, not less, of such violence.

Telegram, founded by the Russian entrepreneur Pavel Durov in 2013, is a messaging service similar to WhatsApp. With over forty million regular users, Telegram has recently taken over WhatsApp as Russia's most popular such service. Although Russians use Telegram for end-to-end messaging, the app is also used as a news dissemination service. Large accounts, often with hundreds of thousands or even millions of followers, are able to spread

messages, videos, photos, and links to their followers in an instant and with almost no external moderation. In response, users – if channel owners permit – are able to respond to content with likes/dislikes and comments, which appear synchronously. As a result, the platform creates a shared discussion space relatively free of interference.

Indeed, the Russian government has in the past attempted to crack down on Telegram, which has been used as an opposition platform widely in both Russia and neighbouring Belarus.[5] Today, however, the state and its supporters are using the service both through official channels for state newspapers and TV services and through astroturfed groups (channels that appear to be run by ordinary users and grassroots groups but are actually organized by the state or its proxies) to spread news, misinformation, and disinformation about Telegram. While forensic data specialists may have the tools to recover some of this lost data, doing so would be near impossible for most.

Providing a full account of Russian reactions to Bucha in the fractured landscape of modern war coverage would require a Herculean effort. Ford and Hoskins observe that in the era of smartphone wars – and I would argue that the Ukraine conflict, in which news of events can travel around the world in a flash and in which citizen journalists and open-source intelligence activists can affect the course and memorializing of war, is the biggest smartphone war to date – the algorithm-affected nature of our knowledge of war creates an archive that is both a place of "radical uncertainty" and open to "potentially unlimited data manipulations."[6] As such, I do not claim in this piece to offer anything but a small sliver of archival data from the online battlefield; the public "archive" of social media content is subject to manipulation as users delete and revise comments and as channel operators promote or remove content.

Nevertheless, gathering and presenting the testimony of even the domestic opponents or vicarious perpetrators of genocide – those who urge

their compatriots on to commit atrocities through written support – creates an archive of sorts and thus a space for the witnessing that has been important in preserving and understanding events in other wartime atrocities, in particular the Shoah. In an era when, as Ford and Hoskins contend, the digital archive is subject to constant manipulation, expansion, and erasure, observing and recording at least some commentary is an important act.

Unlike on most news platforms, the majority of Telegram channels provide the opportunity for users to react to posts with emojis (thumbs ups, hearts, faeces, angry faces) or – although this is often not permitted by moderators – to leave comments. Such a widely used platform that provides a semi-anonymized space – users can use their own phone numbers or create an anonymous account to register, but messages are not end-to-end encrypted and therefore to an extent vulnerable – for public discussion is an important place of discursive interaction in Russia today, where free speech is increasingly lacking and even minor infractions are punishable with heavy fines and jail time. Contrarily, the lack of full anonymization on Telegram means that the platform is also vulnerable to government monitoring.

I made several choices in my approach to cut down on the mass of material that quickly spread on Russian-language social media. I focused my efforts on three channels, each of which are overtly nationalist and patriotic:

- *Donbass News* (*Novosti Donbassa*; @novnew) has 63,599 subscribers. Operated from the separatist Donetsk People's Republic, one of the regions carved out of Ukraine by Russian-backed forces in 2014, the channel publishes information updates, memes, and videos of troops and action at the front.
- *Yuliya Vityazeva* (@vityzeva) has 83,784 subscribers. Vityazeva is

an activist-journalist born in Odessa who rose to prominence as part of the news site *NewsFront* and has been published widely in mainstream Russian media. Vityazeva claims to have been reporting from the front throughout the conflict; the majority of the content she publishes is first-hand commentary on forwarded reports from other journalists.

- *Denazification UA* (*Denatsifikatsiya UA*; @denazi_UA) has 80,157 subscribers. The channel, run by anonymous moderators, appeared on March 15. It publishes inflammatory material – videos, memes, jokes – along with forwarded content and frontline journalism.

These groups, although not the largest such channels, have comments and reactions open to all users, post regularly, have similar subscriber counts, and convey a reasonable sense of what Russian nationalist Telegram looks and feels like.

Within these three channels, I elected to focus only on posts made by the channels within the first 48 hours after Russian media began discussing Bucha. I counted the posts that mentioned Bucha, the number of comments made in total, then found the top ten posts by the number of comments left by users. For the top 10 comments by user interaction within these top ten posts, I assessed the commenter's response to the post's content. I rated the response on a scale of 1–5:

1 – the user accused Russia of perpetrating genocide, strongly supported the West's narrative of Bucha, or otherwise vocally criticized the post content

3 – the user simply agreed, reiterated the post's main talking point, or left a neutral comment/reaction such as a thumbs up sticker.

5 – the user accused the Russian army of not being *sufficiently* violent,

encouraged Russian forces to kill Ukrainian citizens, troops, or politicians, or left a comment that might be seen as incitement to such acts (e.g. calling Ukrainians subhuman or vermin)

Further, I compiled a brief typology of the types of comments made, observing key trends in the kinds of language and manner of expression on display, and offering translated samples of a dozen typical comments (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Number of posts made and user comments left. (Table view)

	Donbass News	Yuliya Vityazeva	Denazification UA
No. of posts	16	50	21
No. of user comments	961	2813	1762

Table 2. Content of commenter responses. (Table view)

	1	2	3	4	5	n=
Donbass News	2	4	39	21	34	100
Yuliya Vityazeva	0	1	59	23	17	100
Denazification UA	1	3	46	29	21	100

Each of the groups dedicated almost all of their output over the 48-hour period in question to coverage of Bucha, almost verbatim reiterating themes from mainstream media (the *Pravda*, *RIA Novosti*, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* news websites and *Pervyi kanal* television channel), and sometimes resharing posts from those outlets' Telegram channels. Users responded in kind, commenting more heavily on posts about Bucha than they had done on posts in the preceding days.

There was virtually no public support for the notion that Russia might be responsible for genocide – or any crimes or unethical actions whatsoever. In the 300 comments surveyed, only three posters expressed strong disapproval for Russia's actions and labelled Russian forces as, for

example, "monsters" or "killers." A further eight users expressed moderate discomfort at Russian behaviour, urging Russian troops to, as one poster put it, "behave better."

One hundred and forty-four – almost half – of the commenters surveyed agreed with the post to which they were replying. Many of these posts took the form of stock phrases that might have been applied to any other event in the war: "This is a tragedy"; "Fuck Ukraine"; "Russia is strong." Others were simply strings of emojis – typically "thumbs up" emojis or strings of Russian flags and hearts.

A substantial number of discussions, regardless of the content of the post in question, returned to the idea that the footage was faked. Users continually claimed that they could "see bodies moving" or encouraged others to "look at the arms" or "look at the bandages" – material derived from Russian mainstream media coverage and familiar from such claims about supposedly staged events in Syria and, earlier in the Ukraine conflict, in Mariupol.[7] Users frequently referenced the notion that Bucha was a "provocation" staged by the West to justify anti-Russian aggression, another favoured Russian media narrative that has been applied to pro-Ukraine actions since the war began in 2014.

However, at least half of the discussion of Bucha by Telegram users I charted exhorted the Russian army to be *more* violent in its approach in Ukraine. A total of 144 users – again, almost half of the total – filled the discussion with racially motivated or violence inducing content. The most vivid examples of this material appeared in posts that featured either Volodymyr Zelensky's words or visit to Bucha on 4 April, or claims that Ukrainians had deliberately murdered Russian speakers. Typical responses to Zelensky posts included:

- "A bullet for his forehead"
- "Destroy the antichrist and his *khokhols* [a derogatory term for

Ukrainians]"

- "Why didn't they shoot these f***ts with a rocket?"
- "Knock these queerf*gs' blocks off before we even get to the fakes"
- "Shoot the guy in the lung that way he'll take an age kicking the bucket and it'll be real painful."

The other type of post that received the strongest pro-genocidal comments was material that claimed that Russian speakers had been deliberately targeted by Ukrainian forces (or the euphemistic "Nazis" or "nationalists"). Typical responses included:

- Grotesque images of pigs and rats in Ukrainian national dress
- "We've got to kill these fuckers"
- Images of Ukrainians with guns to their heads and phrases such as "Shut up, *khokhol*" laid over the top
- "Death penalty for all the *khokhols*, there's no place for them in the world, time to destroy this fucking race"
- "Destroy the satanists, no mercy"
- "*Ragulizm* [a term that mocks Ukrainian culture as primitive] is a sickness. And sickness needs to be cured. It's not a real thing. They'll get us if we don't get them first."

Messages combined religious references with extreme homophobia, overt racism, calls for violence, and descriptions of the Ukrainian other as diseased. Elsewhere, both before and after Bucha, Russian social media users have echoed state media pundits in describing Ukrainians as "vermin," "rats," "unpeople" (*neliudi*), and as "diseased." This discourse is consistent with that found on state news sources both online and on television, which have demonized Ukrainians as subhuman since the

invasion of Crimea in 2014, painted the war in religious terms (indeed, the Moscow Patriarch even blessed Russian military action), and encouraged extreme violence.[8] More alarmingly, this discourse has obvious parallels with Nazi discourse about the other.

Since Bucha, Russian state media has increasingly amplified the message that the goals of the Ukraine war are not restricted to the geopolitical. Television pundits have argued that the very *idea* of Ukraine has been "poisoning the existence of Slavic nations for a hundred years" and must consequently be "erased."[9] In a well-publicized op-ed for the RIA News Agency released late on 3 April, Timofei Sergeitsev argued that the "mass" of Ukraine's population "cannot technically be punished as war criminals" and that every Ukrainian soldier is "complicit" in war crimes.[10] While purporting to call for the avoidance of violence against civilians, Sergeitsev contended that "Banderites [the supporters of Stepan Bandera, a World War 2-era Ukrainian nationalist and today in Russia synonymous with all Ukrainians] … must be eliminated," encouraged a "forcibly neutral" Ukraine, supports launching "mass investigations" against supposed Ukrainians "Nazis," and advocated for a programme of ideological, legal, and educational action to eliminate Ukrainian culture. The language of restraint and legalese barely hides what is a call for violent escalation – and was received as such on Yuliya Vityazeva's Telegram channel, where the top comment on the shared article was "Destroy Ukraine as a sovereign nation."[11]

Indeed, since news of Bucha broke, Russian propagandists have amplified their counter-narrative to such an extent that they now accuse Western powers of both planning and committing an anti-Russian genocide: "The West needs bloody Bucha."[12] Bucha is thus incorporated into a narrative of self-defensive genocide that harks back to historical justifications for crimes committed in Rwanda, Armenia, and elsewhere. Moreover, this rhetoric dovetails with Russian memory of World War 2

(during which, Sergeitsev explains in his RIA article, Russia "crushed German Nazism, the monstrous offspring of Western Civilization's crisis," implicitly blaming the West as a whole for genocide). Today, Russian media, schools, and culture rehashes propaganda from the era that urged Soviets to "kill the German so he/and not you lies on the ground"[13] – drawing a language that normalizes violence as an essential act of self-defence into everyday discourse around war today. Moreover, under Putin's rule, the government has sought to downplay or even justify acts of rape and murder committed by Soviet troops during World War 2.[14] Each turn of the propaganda narrative – it was a fake, Ukrainians did it, the West did it, it was self-defence – vis a vis Bucha has been warmly welcomed on social media by Telegram users in the groups I have explored. They continue to Zelensky, sharing more racist statements, more racist imagery, and using dehumanizing language – all while praising Russia, Russia's troops, and Russian actions in religious terms.

There seems currently to be no halt in the continuing turn toward more extreme narratives. At present (the end of April 2022), calls for mass rape, the use of Ukrainian POWs as prostitutes, and mass murder are easy to find in threads from the Telegram groups I have studied. Almost any Western accusation of Russian lawbreaking is answered with a hail of dehumanizing abuse. Yuliya Vityazeva responded to recent claims that Russia had used chemical weapons with language that now seems typical: "Why poison a handful of cockroaches with Sarin when there are a host of simpler and cheaper ways to do it?"[15] Of the ninety-three responses to the post, not a single commenter suggested that this language was inappropriate or that Ukrainians did *not* deserve this fate. Even where channel owners like Vityazeva do not prompt users with pre-genocidal or dehumanizing talk in their thread-opening post, users tend to introduce this language into the conversation.[16]

Ordinary Russians, indulging in the anonymity and rambunctious, chaotic nature of postmodern meme culture, embrace the idea that events in Bucha are a testament to Russian national spirit. One Telegram group, for example, is selling a t-shirt in white, red, and blue marked with the "Z" and "V" that have come to symbolize the war, depicting a pig's butchery, and headed with the words, "Slaughter in Bucha: We Can Do It Again." The second half of the slogan refers to the familiar idea that Russians can repeat the events of World War 2, when the nation supposedly sacrificed a generation in order to save the world from the threat of Nazi Germany.[17] Here, the idea of Bucha has been detached from reality, turned on its head, and adopted into a popular discourse of national pride – a discourse that equates national being with mass killing, and mass killing with self-defence.

Telegram is an environment that may be susceptible to manipulation by bots created by malicious actors working to promote and to challenge Russian state narratives of the war.[18] As noted above, government surveillance is also capable of reaching into and observing users in the semi-anonymized space of Telegram. However, the almost total absence of comments opposing rapidly formed and genocide-justifying readings of what occurred in Bucha perhaps indicates that pro and anti-government groups are fragmenting, leaving one another to their own "bubbles" in which like-minded users are – whether by real users or bots – whipped up into more and more extreme frenzies. Even if bots are used to manipulate activity, ordinary users are widely commenting on, sharing, and participating in discussion.

At best, users on the nationalist groups I studied exhibited a tendency towards conspiratorial thinking that, inspired by narratives spread by President Vladimir Putin and his propagandists, dismissed accusations of Russian genocide as unbelievable or simply fakery.[19] Even though I have explored comments in an extreme corner of the social media sphere, this

conspiracy mindedness is reiterated in more moderate forums, where internet users side with explanations of Bucha that focus on fakery over reality.[20]

In the most alarming cases, though, users seem to engage in a race to post ever more extreme responses, making calls for Russian troops to commit genocide against Ukraine's population. To do so, they draw on both long-standing and new state media narratives about Russian nationality and the Ukraine conflict, framing their opinions in the language of a historical Russian patriotism and painting genocide as a form of self-defence. Users express these views in an almost rote language that dehumanizes Ukrainians on gender, sexual, and racial lines. Group think and its accordant peer pressure is a well-documented phenomenon in historical incidents of genocide, when some members of a particular group either felt unable to speak out or empowered to voice more extreme content.[21] However, this dynamic seems particularly acute when on social media, where users are able to self-select into pro and anti-war channels, avoiding the pressure that pushes them to remain wary of voicing their true feelings. Instead, they are able to find likeminded users with ease.[22]

In spaces like the three groups I have studied, users are exposed to extreme views, may observe their peers responding to those views with positivity, and are at liberty to share their own, more grotesque spins on events. Even moderate users – some half of those who commented on the posts I observed – are dissuaded from voicing opposition to pro-government narratives, enforcing silence that feeds the Russian state's growing power over narratives about the war and creating a discursive spiral that leads towards further extremism. These findings, although only from a small sample of data, should give academics of genocide a means to understand more deeply the nature of genocide committed in conflicts that, like the Russia-Ukraine war, are highly – and instantaneously – mediatized through online channels.

Notes

1. "Zelensky Accuses Russia of Torture and 'Genocide' After Bodies of Civilians Found," *CBC*, 2 April 2022, https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/ukraine-war-bucha-1.6407343.

2. "Canadian MPs Unanimously Back Motion Calling Russian Attacks in Ukraine a 'Genocide'," *CTV News*, 27 April 2022, https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/canadian-mps-unanimously-back-motion-calling-russian-attacks-in-ukraine-a-genocide-1.5878900.

3. For example, Svante E. Cornell, "International Reactions to Massive Human Rights Violations: The Case of Chechnya," *Europe-Asia Studies* 51, no. 1 (1999): 85–100; Douglas Irvin-Erickson, "Genocide Discourses: American and Russian Strategic Narratives of Conflict in Iraq and Ukraine," *Politics and Governance* 5, no. 3 (2017).

4. Jade McGlynn and Ian Garner, "Russia's War Crime Denials Are Fuel for More Atrocities," *Foreign Policy*, 23 April 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/23/propaganda-russia-atrocity-bucha/.

5. Ksenia Ermoshina and Francesca Musiani, "The Telegram Ban: How Censorship 'Made in Russia' Faces a Global Internet," *First Monday: University of Illinois at Chicago Library* 26, no. 5 (2021), https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03215281/.

6. Matthew Ford and Andrew Hoskins, *Radical War: Data, Attention, Control* (London: Hurst; New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 25.

7. See, for example, Gabriele Cosentino, *Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order* (Cham: Palgrave, 2020), 87–100.

8. Mykola Riabchuk, "Ukrainians as Russia's Negative 'Other': History Comes Full Circle," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49, no. 1 (2016): 75–85.

9. @Nexta_TV, Twitter post, 15 April 2022, https://twitter.com/nexta_tv/status/1514967277137022977.

10. Timofei Sergeitsev, "Chto Rossiia dolzhna sdelat' s Ukrainoi," *RIA Novosti*, 3 April 2022, https://ria.ru/20220403/ukraina-1781469605.html.

11. @Vityzeva, Telegram post, 4 April 2022, https://t.me/vityzeva81/788401.

12. @nasha_stranaZ, Telegram post, 10 April 2022, https://t.me/c/1400700658/32243.

13. "*Tak ubei zhe nemtsa, chtob on,/A ne ty na zemle lezhal*." This line is from the war correspondent Konstantin Simonov's 1942 poem "Kill Him!" (*Ubei ego!*), which is widely taught in Russian schools and recited as part of memorial events in contemporary Russia. See, for example, N. V. Egorova, *Pourochnye razrabotki po literature* (Moscow: Bako, 2021), 295–7. For a translation, see Mike Munford, *Wait For Me* (Ripon: Smokestack, 2020).

14. Mark Edele, "Fighting Russia's History Wars: Vladimir Putin and the Codification of World War II," *History and Memory* 29, no. 2 (2017): 90–124.

15. @Vityzeva, Telegram post, 11 April 2022, https://t.me/vityzeva81/831702.

16. See, for example, @Vityzeva, Telegram post, 28 April 2022, https://t.me/vityzeva81/915499.

17. @Xenasolo, Twitter post, 11 April 2022, https://twitter.com/xenasolo/status/1513437939287695361.

18. Dmytro Plakhta, "Telegram as a Tool for Political Influence and Manipulation," *TV and Radio*

Journalism 19 (2020): 88–94, http://publications.lnu.edu.ua/collections/index.php/teleradio/article/download/2955/3195.

19. For Putin spreading conspiracy narratives, see @rian_ru, Telegram post, 7 April 2022, https://t.me/rian_ru/157645.

20. The site *publico.ru*, run by the newspaper *Vedomosti*, presents two experts' opinions on a particular topic. Users vote on their favourite version of events. In the case of Bucha, 75 per cent of users voted for the argument that the West would never listen to Russia and were determined to fake atrocities and level false accusations as a result. "Bucha," *publico.ru*, 4 April 2022, https://publico.ru/topics/bucha/.

21. Gregory Stanton, "The Rwandan Genocide: Why Early Warning Failed," *Journal of African Conflicts and Peace Studies* 1, no. 2 (2009): 6–25; P. Suedfeld, "Reverberations of the Holocaust Fifty Years Later: Psychology's Contributions to Understanding Persecution and Genocide," *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne* 41, no. 1 (2000): 1–9.

22. This phenomenon has also been widely observed in western democracies. For example, see Jacob Groshek and Karolina Koc-Michalska, "Helping Populism Win? Social Media Use, Filter Bubbles, and Support for Populist Presidential Candidates in the 2016 US Presidential Election," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 9 (2017): 1389–407.

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Sections

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